A Child's Story of American Literature

V. The Torches.

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LOOKING at it from this end, the fact that the Revolutionary period produced, after the smoke had cleared away, so little literature of the finer sort seems surprising. Nothing stirs up people's minds like a revolution which succeeds in establishing new popular liberties, and it is usually followed by an outpouring of thought and imagination. The revolutions in France and in Italy even stirred the literature of England. But in America the quarter century after Yorktown is almost barren of lasting literary fruit.

Two reasons for this have already been given. Men spent their intellectual energy in settling great political questions, or they cracked their voices in trying to force them. Then, too, many of the most cultured and educated people, who might have written good literature, had been driven off because they were loyalists. Those who have the ability to write with thoughts and imagination generally cling to the old and hesitate to venture upon new and untried paths which may lead them away from all they like and admire most.

There may also be another important reason. Life just after the war was too unsettled for people to sit down quietly and write. They could not shut the door upon the chaotic and turbulent world outside. Nor could most people purchase the leisure for this quiet sort of writing. They were too busy and perplexed trying to make both ends meet. The comfortable living just before the war had been swept away. The taxes levied to pay for the war were staggering, and the new nation was trying, as the nations of Europe, new and old, after the great world war, have been trying, to bring money back to its normal value. This had been tremendously depreciated by the necessary issue of paper money. "Not worth a continental" is a phrase which has come down to us from the paper currency issued then by Congress. "It took," said Washington, "a wagon load of money to buy a wagon load of provisions." Ten paper dollars were worth only one cent of real money.

It is constantly forgotten that literature and art are like every other activity of man. They must depend upon physical and economic conditions. Even genius cannot, as it is so often wrongly said in books, make its way in spite of all and carve out its own conditions. No statement is more misleading than "You cannot keep a good man down." Conditions may keep any good man down by not giving him the chance to get up. Did you know for instance, that some of the greatest men in English literature had to pay for publishing their own books, because no publisher thought they would sell? If these authors had not had the money we should not have their books to-day. But, you may say, they had written them just the same, and some day some less stupid publisher would have published them. Well, then, suppose these authors couldn't even have bought the paper to write them on? Or were too busy earning bread and butter for their families to spend so much vitality on work that brought them in no money? Or could write only at night when the day's work was over and had no money to buy oil to write by? Yet, even if they had never proved it to the world, they would have been geniuses just the same, would they not? You see, then, how wrong it is to claim that genius will make its way in spite of all. This is something you will have particular occasion to remember during the whole course of the story of American literature.

Although there were no important literary names in this period, an even more important literary work was being done than if there had been. It was performed by people, nameless now, who were trying to establish newspapers and magazines. With the newspapers we have not much to do in a story of literature, except to remind you how they must have increased the habit of reading in those persons whose most up to date reading hitherto had been only an annual almanac. Even to-day we do not call newspapers literature, though the work of some of our best literary men may appear there, because in general they are written for a purpose which, however important, is not primarily literary. Suppose we say that newspapers are the common people of letters, magazines are the aristocracy, and books are the nobility. In this period after the Revolution, then, we have no titled people, but we have a very active middle and lower class; and with a literature as with a nation, it is these that show the vitality of the present and the promise for the future.

These plebeians and aristocrats of literature in that day were alike in one particular. They could be established only by men who were able to get the money to do so and could afford to lose it if they did not succeed; and generally it happened that their founders did most of the writing themselves. But these were almost the only features which the two had in common. The newspapers wanted to tell the people what was going on in their world and how it could go on better; the magazines wanted to appeal to and cultivate a taste for good literature.

Did you ever see a picture of George Washington without his beautiful powdered wig, done up in a queue behind or tied with a ribbon? But Franklin, even when he was sitting for his portrait, wore his thinnish hair brushed straight back from his forehead—no wig and powder and ribbon for him! Yet one was not less manly than the other nor his services less indispensable. There you have the difference between the plebeian and the aristocrat in the literature which we are talking about now. Franklin knew and appreciated literature of the more æsthetic kind, but he was too busy telling people how the world was going on and how it might go better to try to write it. Even the magazine which he started in his younger days was called a historical chronicle. It was commonsense and comfort that he tried to add to life. The aristocrat tries to add interest and beauty also, and it is the contribution of the aristocratic magazines rather than the no less noteworthy and important contribution of the newspapers, which concerns a story of literature.

But first we must speak of a very puzzling thing. Convinced as Washington and Franklin and Jefferson and all the rest were, that a democracy must depend on the education of the people and thus on the printing press, here the new nation had gone and started a post office without making any arrangements to handle printed matter! The Government refused to transport any at all. The individual postmaster was more accommodating, and was in the habit of sending the newspaper along with the mail, unofficially and for nothing. Consequently when the bags were full he let them wait over. This gave rise to as many complaints from the publishers and subscribers as if they had been paying for the service. Besides, the mail was always late enough anyway, since the post never traveled at night. In 1790 there were seventy-five post offices in the country, almost three times as many as there had been when the Declaration was signed, and five years later there were 453. This tremendous increase demanded constant reorganization of the postal system; and the Government, seeing that the postriders were carrying the newspapers anyway, decided to get some revenue out of it. Consequently newspapers were finally admitted officially to the mails, but not until about ten years after the close of the war.

The newspapers, having had their transportation for nothing and merely at the cost of inexpensive complaints from subscribers at the delay under the old system, naturally protested. They were afraid their subscribers wouldn't pay the one cent extra for the sake of getting their papers a day or so earlier. But the new law proved not to hurt the newspapers at all. It was the magazines that suffered. If the postrider took them at all, now it must be at letter rates. This was ten cents a sheet for any distance over 100 miles. How many magazines do you think could keep going to-day at that rate? It would cost one dollar to send a twenty page magazine from New York to Hartford. Only magazines published in cities large enough to support them without out of town subscribers could live under such a system. And as late as 1815 only 5 per cent. of the population lived in cities.

Nor were there enough people in any city, as was proved again and again, to support a magazine. The few people in America who cared to pay for higher class reading were scattered everywhere. The National Magazine, published at Richmond in 1799, returned thanks in its second number for an order of fifty-five copies from Georgia and sixty-six from Connecticut. Can you picture how many hundreds of miles of unhewn forests these magazines had to ride through on horseback and over how many rivers they had to row to reach their homes? It was not until 1804 that the mail was opened to the "aristocrats" at lower than letter rates. Then the great number of new ones which sprang up everywhere shows you how effectively the postal regulations had succeeded for years in "keeping a good man down."

Even in the three principal cities, however, few people proved willing to pay

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